



# Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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## The Land We Call Home

Twenty-three years ago, when Inter Pares first began its work in the Philippines, most of the island of Negros was devoted to sugar plantations, owned by a handful of extremely wealthy families. Impoverished sugar workers and their families lived, worked, and died in a feudal relationship with land owners unchanged from the Spanish *hacenderos* of the 1800s.

In the mid-1980s, world prices for sugar collapsed. Production ceased, workers lost their jobs, and people began to starve. Desperate to feed their families, workers mobilized to demand access to plantation land to grow food crops.

In 1988, in response to mobilizations of peasants and agricultural workers throughout the Philippine archipelago, the national government brought in reforms to legally redistribute land from large landholders to small-scale farmers. While thousands of Filipino peasants, small-scale farmer associations, and agricultural workers cooperatives have succeeded in using the reform to acquire land to feed themselves and their children, large landholders continue to use both violence and the courts to maintain their wealth and privilege.

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We witness irresponsible mining contaminating the land and water on which rural communities depend in Peru, Mexico, Colombia, Canada's North, and many parts of Africa. Palm oil, jatropha, and sugar cane destined for biofuels are replacing food production on large swaths of land in Burma, Malaysia, Colombia, Mexico, and the Philippines. Local farmers in coastal areas of India and Bangladesh are being displaced by the aquaculture industry. Small producers in Central America are losing their land to companies exporting flowers to the United States and Canada.



Rural village in Negros, Philippines.

Many of these displaced people migrate into towns and cities. As of 2005, half the world's population live in urban centres, and one billion people – a sixth of the world's population – now live in makeshift shanty towns on land they do not own. In these unplanned and often illegal settlements, residents struggle for fair use of land for shelter and for basic services.

In the meantime, the other half of the world's population continues to live in rural areas. While most rural folk depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, their ability to steward and remain on their lands is increasingly eroded by large-scale corporate land takeovers, or by armed conflict generated by economic interests.

The struggle for land and justice can indeed seem overwhelming. But every day, other realities are being created around the globe. Inter Pares is privileged to work with and support people who, like the Filipino peasants a generation ago, are taking action and working in common cause to resist displacement, to gain access to land and water, to acquire legal rights to the places they call home, and to insist on democratic accountability for the actions of their governments, as well as those of corporations and wealthy elites.

This *Bulletin* describes some of the activities in which Inter Pares and our counterparts are defending people from displacement from their land and homes, and promoting the policies required to sustain rural livelihoods and urban communities. ✂

## On the City's Margins

In the slum of Apelo Cruz in Manila, most people will tell you that they are from somewhere else, often a small village on another island of the Philippines. They say they still have family there, but there just wasn't enough land to be able to make a living. So they came to the city in search of work.

They may find work, but secure access to land in the city is another question.

While the houses in Apelo Cruz are tiny and crowded along the sides of a trash-filled canal, residents do their best to make their houses attractive places to live: potted flowers are placed lovingly at the door, and posters on the walls cover the make-shift construction. Families built where they found open land, and where nobody forced them to leave. But they struggle to get electricity and access to water and sanitation because the city claims they are not legal residents.

As one resident told Inter Pares staff, "The government says we should not be living here because it is not our land and it sometimes floods. But we built our houses here – they may not look like much but they are all we have..." She looked over to where children played in the lane. "...And we raised our families here. We work here. Where else can we go?"

Inter Pares' counterpart Likhaan has been working with the women of Apelo Cruz for many years, creating the Apelo Women's Health Association to address issues of reproductive and community health. The women asserted that gaining legal title to their land would lift the constant threat of expulsion, allowing them to invest in better-quality permanent homes – making the houses more secure, as well as improving families' health and sanitation. Decent housing is fundamental to people's lives, and security of land ownership is critical to people's ability to invest in their homes.

So with the help of Likhaan, neighbourhood women organized the vast majority of the community, and established the Apelo Cruz Neighborhood Association (ACNA) to inves-



Likhaan health clinic in Apelo Cruz, Manila.

REBECCA WOLSKA

tigate how to purchase the land from the wealthy absentee landlords. But when ACNA tried to register to purchase the land, it was faced with a new regulation preventing the official registration of more than one neighbourhood association per community. ACNA discovered that a religious housing association – which represents only 10 per cent of local residents but has influential connections – had already registered. And that association was now trying to impose curfews and restrictions on sexual education and family planning in the community, in accordance with their own beliefs.

Just recently, the two associations have agreed to merge; the new structure, adopted with Likhaan's advice, has a democratic structure, which gives ACNA members majority control. Residents can now purchase the land, securing their homes and their futures. ✂

## Land and Indigenous Sovereignty in Chiapas

From the struggle for independence, through the Mexican Revolution and the indigenous uprising in Chiapas in 1994, claims over land have been a central part of the demands of social movements in Mexico. For indigenous communities in Chiapas, land is not just a means of survival. It is also central to their identity and their vision of indigenous autonomy. Yet these communities continue to face displacement and dispossession, while their struggles to defend and reclaim their land are met with increasing intimidation and violence.

The Mexican government aggressively promotes foreign investment in mining and hydroelectric projects – almost all of it Canadian – that have displaced indigenous communities and contaminated local ecosystems in resource-rich

Chiapas. Government agricultural schemes have converted massive tracts of land from food production to commercial "biofuel" crops. State programs like the Rural Cities Initiative, where entire rural communities are being moved to form small cities in order to concentrate services like education and health care, have left families uprooted and under-served. The government's counterinsurgency war has made Chiapas highly militarized, and has encouraged the rise of paramilitary groups that violently force communities from their land. All of these policies have devastated rural areas, leading to increased migration and greater insecurity and poverty.

But these indigenous communities are resisting such processes of dispossession with the support of Inter Pares' counterparts.

# To Till the Land

For millions of people living in rural areas, access to land is essential for survival. Inter Pares supports people as they defend themselves against forced displacement, and assists farmers to make more productive and sustainable use of their agricultural lands. We also support local initiatives that promote policies and regulations to facilitate rather than hinder small-scale farmers' important contribution to food security.

- In rural Bangladesh, Nijera Kori works with more than 800,000 agricultural day labourers to organize to negotiate better terms for their labour, as well as to press local governments to provide their communities with essential public services such as water and sanitation. It also assists landless people to gain access to communal lands and water sources, which are frequently illegally privatized by wealthy land owners. Working with people living in coastal regions, Nijera Kori helps them organize to defend themselves from the often-violent takeover of communal coastal land for the production of shrimp for export.
- “Land grabbing” is the sale or long-term lease of large tracts of agricultural land to external interests for export. In West Africa, the Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN) represents millions of small-scale farmers. COPAGEN educates rural and urban communities and politicians about the consequences of land grabbing, which gives away land needed by locals for their livelihoods and food security, while burdening them with the environmental costs of intensive industrial farming. COPAGEN members are demanding greater transparency from their governments on public land transactions, and are seeking reform of land ownership laws to take into account the interests of family farms.
- In the semi-arid Deccan plateau region of India, the government land reform program provided some land to poor people in the district. However, the land was of such poor



Deccan Development Society women in front of the community grain bank.

- quality that crop yields were extremely low. The Deccan Development Society assisted five thousand women in fifteen villages to improve the land using organic techniques, eventually restoring over ten thousand acres of their land. The women now grow, store, and distribute enough food so that even during droughts they have adequate supplies and no longer require government food assistance.
- The loss of rice land is a major problem in many Asian countries. Land grabbing, land speculation, and the conversion of land from food production to biofuel production threaten the livelihoods of millions of small-scale rice farmers. Pesticide Action Network – Asia Pacific (PAN-AP) works with farmers' organizations in eighteen countries to protect rice farmers and to promote the conservation of traditional rice varieties. Through educational and cultural events, training, research, and advocacy, PAN-AP and its members promote concrete ways to create productive and sustainable agricultural ecosystems without harmful pesticides. PAN-AP engages with governments to advocate for the creation of agricultural policies that recognize small-scale producers as the foundation for national food security. ❧

The Center for Women's Rights of Chiapas (CDMCH) provides legal support for women so they can exercise their rights to land within the communal *ejido* land system, a right that is made more essential by the massive number of migrants, mostly men, leaving Chiapas in search of work. The CDMCH runs a training school for women to become human rights promoters in their communities, to raise awareness of the rights of women to land and livelihoods, and to participate in local decision-making.

The Fray Pedro de la Nada Human Rights Committee provides counsel and support for legal disputes over land in rural areas. Their team of human rights advocates is documenting human rights violations of displaced indigenous communities who are victims of state or paramilitary violence.

The Fray Bartolomé Human Rights Centre (FrayBa) accompanies indigenous communities that are defending their rights to land, providing capacity-building for community organizations. FrayBa also supplies media, legal, and political support to community groups attacked by paramilitary organizations in regions where there are powerful mining and narcotrafficking interests.

The work Inter Pares supports in Chiapas reveals that despite the many aggressions that indigenous communities are facing, their desire to defend their land and their autonomy is growing stronger. With the help of organizations like the CDMCH, Fray Pedro, and FrayBa, these communities and their organizations are becoming a powerful force for social change. ❧

# Stop the Global Land Grab!

The following article was written by GRAIN, an international non-profit organization that supports small farmers and social movements in their promotion of community-controlled and biodiversity-based agriculture. GRAIN staff have been Inter Pares collaborators for several years, particularly in Canada and West Africa.



La Via Campesina farmer, Dolores Hortense Kinkodila-Tombo (Congo-Brazza).

The scramble to control farmland in Africa, Asia, and Latin America by state and private investors is not a new phenomenon, but one that has intensified in recent years. In early 2008, Gulf State officials flew the globe looking for large areas of cultivable land to acquire to grow rice, which would allow them to feed their burgeoning populations without relying on international trade. So too did Korean, Libyan, Egyptian and other officials. Investor negotiations included high-level government representatives, charged with the task of securing political, economic, and financial cooperation with other countries through agricultural land transactions. In mid-2008, as the financial crisis deepened, and in the midst of increasing food insecurity, investors such as hedge funds, private equity groups, and investment banks – some of them Canadian – started buying up farmland in the South. These investors realized that there is money to be made in farming; there are many people to feed, food prices are likely to stay high over time, and farmland can be had for cheap.

This mass transfer of farmland to outside private and state actors is known as “land grabbing.” To date, more than 40 million hectares have changed hands or are under negotiation – twenty million of which are in Africa alone. GRAIN calculates that over \$100 billion has been put on the table by state and private investors to make it happen. Despite governmental facilitation, these deals are mainly signed and carried out by private corporations, in collusion with host country officials. GRAIN has compiled data on the identity of land grabbers and the scope of land deals, most of which has been kept secret from the public for fear of political backlash.

Nothing in these land grabs in the South is in the interest of local communities, many of whom face severe food insecurity themselves. And this race for farmlands is designed to do away with small-scale farming, not improve it. This new global trend has thus been quickly labelled by social

movements as a recipe for profound conflict over not only land, but water as well. In Ethiopia, the government has publicly stated that it wants to lease 3 million hectares of its farmland to foreign investors, with around 1 million hectares already reported to have been signed away to Arab, Asian, and European investors since 2008. Ethiopian activists claim that the impact of these policies on communities’ livelihoods will be tantamount to genocide against the country’s indigenous population.

In response to criticism, governments, international agencies such as the World Bank, and private companies are trying to work out what they call “codes of conduct” or “voluntary guidelines” to make these deals “win-win.” Social movements see things quite differently. For GRAIN, all this talk of “win-win” is simply not realistic. It promises transparency and good governance, but foreign investors are unlikely to respect communities’ rights to land when local governments fail to do so. And those who believe in win-win scenarios are divided about what should happen in the likely case of food pressures in the host countries. Should countries be allowed to restrict exports, even from foreign investors’ farms? Or will so-called free trade and investors’ rights take precedence – a real possibility under the world’s trade and investment regimes? No one we have spoken with among concerned groups in Africa, Asia, or Latin America takes this “win-win” idea seriously.

Today, with over a billion people facing hunger daily, we desperately need to build and protect food systems that feed people. The only way forward is to strengthen family farming and local markets. However, land grabs are rapidly taking us in the opposite direction. We must invest instead in food sovereignty, in a million local markets, and in the three billion farmers and farm workers who currently produce most of the food upon which our societies rely. These hold the hope for a far more viable future than mega-farms controlled by the few. ☘

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221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6P1  
Phone (1-613) 563-4801 or (1-866) 563-4801 (toll free)  
Fax (1-613) 594-4704 [www.interpares.ca](http://www.interpares.ca)

With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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